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Juvenile Violence in Washington: First-Time and Repeat Offenders

The Washington Legislature in 1994 directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to study juvenile violence and other at-risk behaviors of youth.¹ The Institute was instructed to analyze trends in these behaviors and evaluate the cost-effectiveness of Washington's efforts to achieve measurable reductions in violence and at-risk behaviors. This research brief is part of the Institute's plan to provide the Legislature and other interested persons with up-to-date findings on these topics.

Four Study Questions This research brief provides information on the increasing rate of juvenile violence in Washington. Four questions are answered:

1. ***How has the overall level of juvenile violence changed in Washington in recent years, and is the increase due to repeat violent offenders?***
2. ***How many convictions for violent offenses do violent offenders receive?***
3. ***How many first-time violent juvenile offenders have a prior juvenile court record for less-serious offenses?***
4. ***How old are juveniles when they are convicted of their first violent offense?***

Background The Institute recently published a report on long-run trends in juvenile violence and other at-risk behaviors of youth.² Using data on the *number of arrests* by police and sheriffs' offices in the state, the report found a significant increase in the rate of juvenile violence in Washington in the last decade.

For greater understanding of this increase in juvenile violence, this report uses another source of information: *the number of convictions or adjudications* in the State's juvenile courts. When a juvenile offender is convicted, his or her offense is recorded in the Juvenile Information System maintained by the Office of the Administrator for the Courts. The courts keep this information because, since 1977, a juvenile's sentence for an offense depends on his or her recorded criminal history, age, and the seriousness of the current offense. This report examines all juvenile court convictions for all juvenile offenders in Washington State who became 18 years old between 1988 and 1994. Think of this from the perspective of the "class of 1988," the "class of 1989," and so forth. Because some juveniles are tried in adult court for certain crimes, the analysis presented here also includes any convictions these juveniles received in adult court before the age of 18. The adult court data is from the Washington State Department of Correction's Offender Based Tracking System.

¹ RCW 70.190.050.

² Steve Aos, Roxanne Lieb, and Robert Barnoski, Washington State Institute for Public Policy, (January 1996), *Trends in At-Risk*

How has the overall level of juvenile violence changed in Washington in recent years, and is the increase due to repeat violent offenders?

The overall rate of juvenile violence in Washington—which includes the serious crimes of murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault—has more than doubled in the last six years.

Figure 1 shows that out of every thousand juveniles who turned 18 in 1994, 13.5 had at least one conviction for a felony violent offense sometime during their juvenile years. For the class of 1988, on the other hand, 6.4 out of a thousand 18-year olds had at least one felony violent conviction while they were juveniles. **Thus, juveniles who turned 18 in 1994 had a violence conviction rate 111 percent higher than juveniles who turned 18 in 1988.**

Repeat violent offenders, however, do not explain this doubling in the rate of juvenile violence. Figures 1 and 2 show that most juveniles in Washington who are convicted once for a serious violent offense do not go on to commit additional violent offenses while they are juveniles. The percentage convicted of additional violent offenses has been quite constant.

Figure 2 shows that there has not been a clear upward trend in the proportion of repeat violent offenders. Data for the 18-year old classes from 1988 to 1994 indicate that between 8 and 10 percent of juveniles convicted of one felony violent offense were subsequently convicted for additional felony violent crimes before they turned 18 years old. **Thus, most of the increase seen in the overall rate of juvenile violence has been the result of more juveniles committing one serious violent offense, not a disproportionate increase in repeat juvenile violent offenders.**

Figure 1

The Overall Rate of Juvenile Violence Has Increased in Washington...

Out of every thousand 18-year olds in Washington in 1994, 13.5 had at least one conviction for a serious violent offense sometime during their juvenile years.

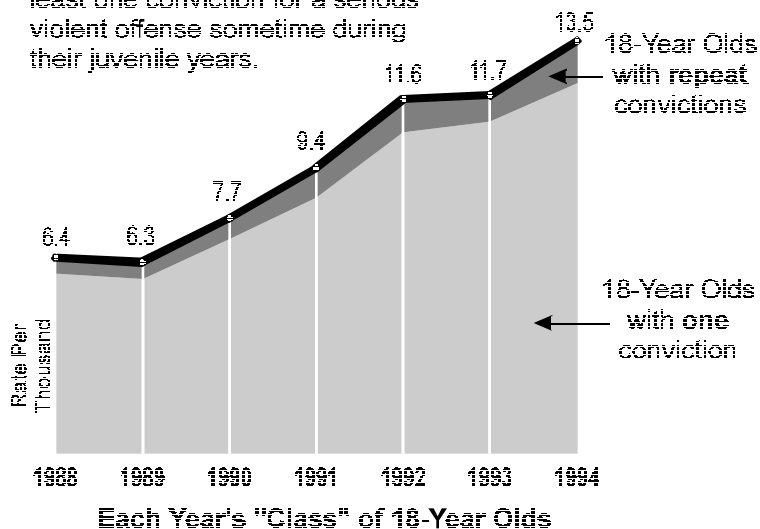
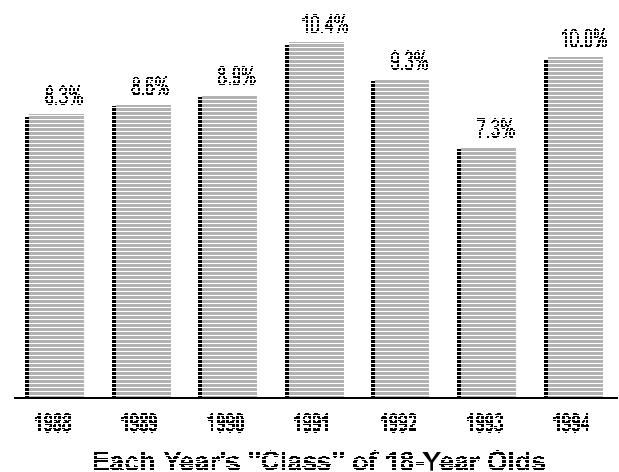


Figure 2

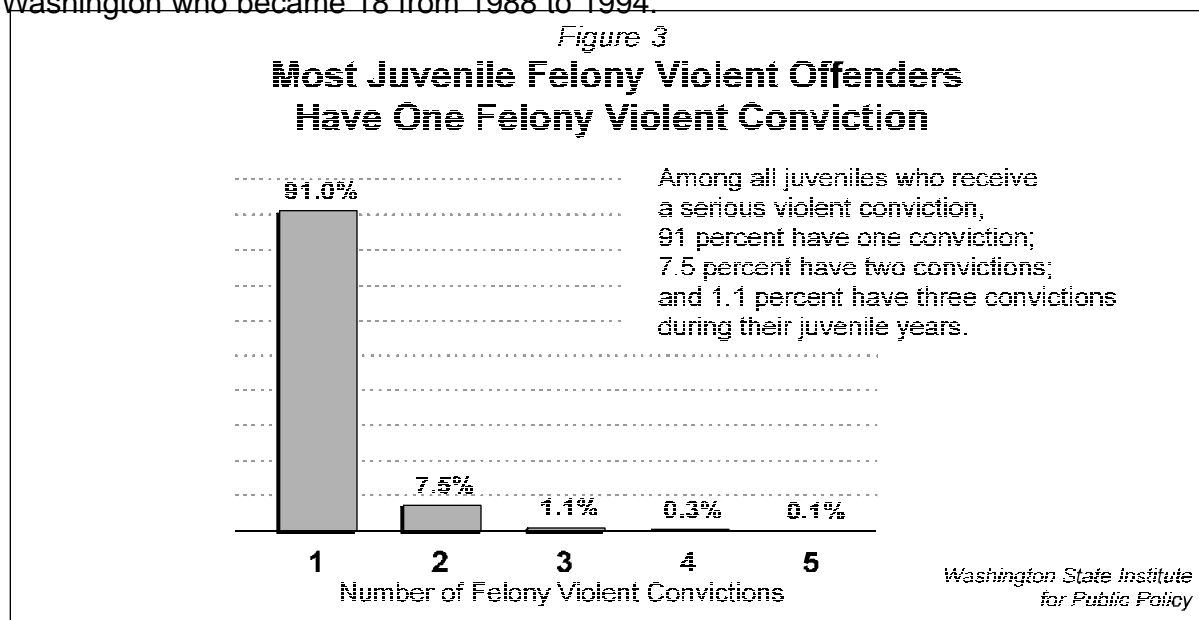
...But The Rate of Repeat Violent Offending Has Stayed About the Same.

Among the 18-year olds in 1994 who had one conviction for a serious violent offense sometime while they were juveniles, 10 percent were convicted of additional felony violent offenses before turning 18.



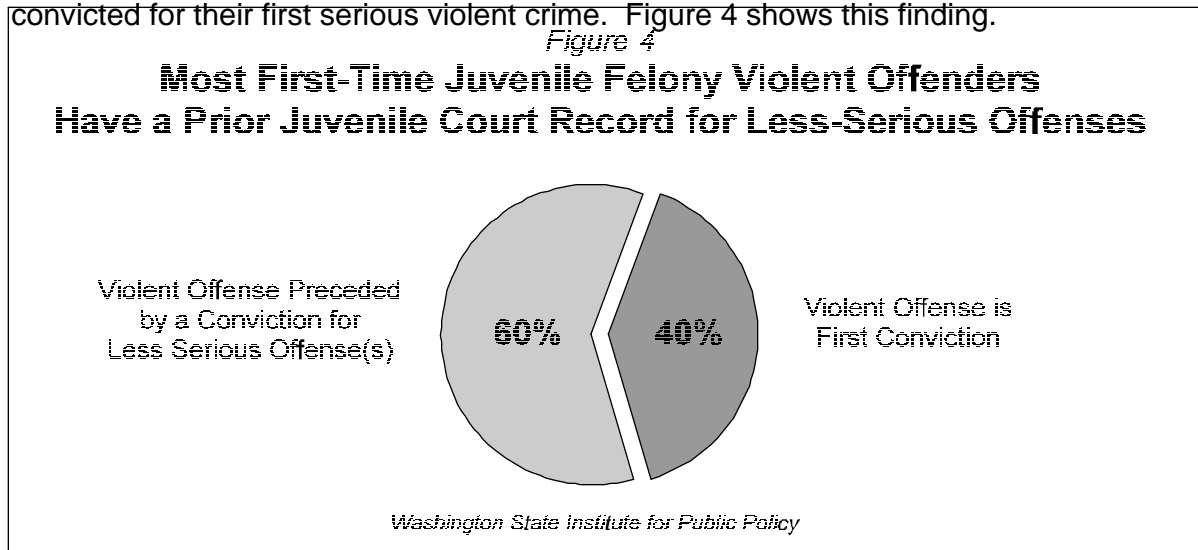
How many convictions for violent offenses do violent offenders receive?

Figure 3 shows that 91 percent of juveniles who have a felony violent offense, have **one conviction** for violence while they are under the age of 18. Another 7.5 percent have two felony violent convictions and an additional 1.1 percent have three felony violent convictions. A very small percentage have four or more convictions. These data cover all juveniles in Washington who became 18 from 1988 to 1994.



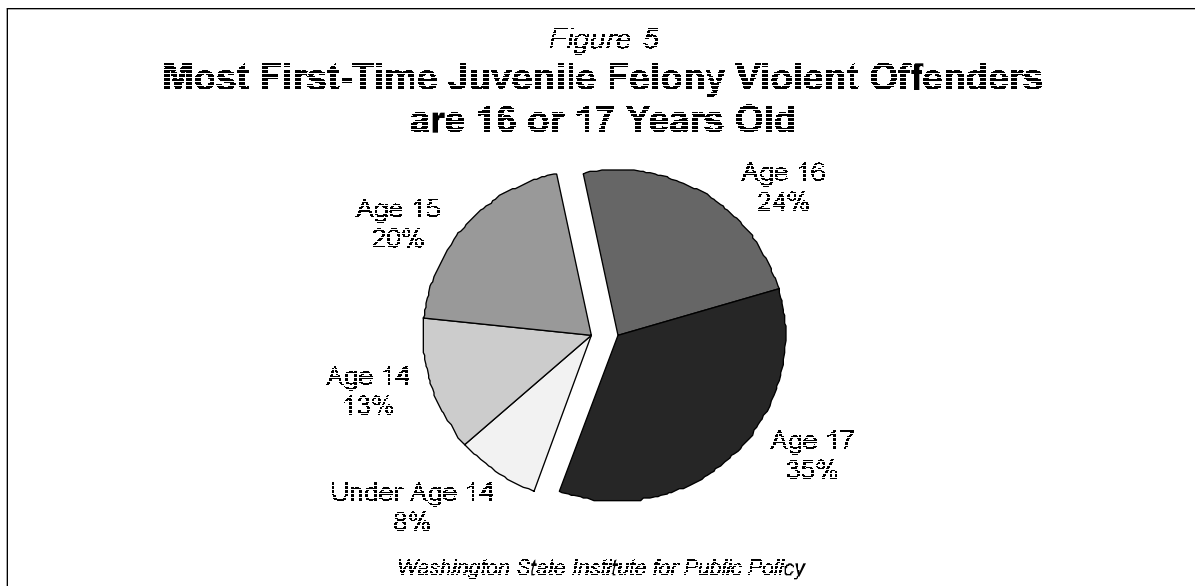
How many first-time violent juvenile offenders have a prior juvenile court record for less-serious offenses?

Juvenile court records show that of all first-time violent juvenile offenders, 60 percent have had a previous adjudication for a less serious offense. Correspondingly, 40 percent of first-time felony violent offenders have not had a prior contact with a juvenile court before being convicted for their first serious violent crime. Figure 4 shows this finding.



How old are juveniles when they are convicted of their first violent offense?

Most juvenile offenders (59 percent) are 16- or 17-years old when they receive their first conviction for a felony violent offense. These data cover all juveniles in Washington who became 18 from 1988 to 1994. There has been no trend in this age distribution over these years. Figure 5 shows this information.



In future reports, the Institute will examine the following questions: whether juveniles progress from less serious to more serious offenses; how sentencing decisions and treatment programs affect subsequent juvenile criminal behavior; and how many juvenile offenders go on to offend as adults.

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Washington State Institute for Public Policy

The Washington Legislature created the Washington State Institute for Public Policy in 1983. A Board of Directors—representing the Legislature, the governor, and public universities—governs the Institute, hires the director, and guides the development of all activities. The Institute's mission is to carry out practical research, at legislative direction, on issues of importance to Washington State.